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ESSAY

ON THE

INABILITY OF SINNERS.

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AN ESSAY, &c.

TO relieve the difficulty arising from the fact, that man is required by the law of God to do what he is unable to perform, a distinction has been made by some valuable divines, between natural and moral inability. When this distinction is carefully explained, and nothing more meant by it, than that man possesses the faculties of a rational and moral being, which render him accountable for his conduct; and that, although all these faculties are so corrupted and perverted by the fall, that he has become unable to fulfil the will of God, yet he is inexcusable for every breach of the divine precepts to which his depravity leads him; it is not likely to mislead by making wrong impressions.

But this distinction, thus temperately and carefully stated and illustrated, has been pushed by some writers and preachers to an unwarrantable length. . They do not hesitate to use such unguarded expressions as the following: "Sinners have full ability to repent and believe; they have ample power to do the will of God; he requires from them nothing above their strength."

Is this the language of sober theology? Can it be justified by an appeal, either to Scripture or to Christian experience? Is it not repugnant to both, as well to the Standards of our

Church? Is no danger to be apprehended that the use of such language will mislead the mind from the truth, and foster in sinners a spirit of self-sufficiency? Does it not, in fact, counteract the design of that painful and humiliating work of legal convictions and distressing terrors, which usually precedes regeneration; and by which they are made experimentally to feel how utterly unable they are to emancipate themselves from the thralldom of sin, and how entirely dependent they are for this great and necessary blessing on the sovereign and mighty grace of God?

As the fundamental precept of his law, Jehovah proclaims, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might:"* and has any unregenerate sinner ability to fulfil this great commandment, in all its extent, and thus to keep the whole law? Where is the saint living, sanctified as he may be by the grace of his God, who, having reached this elevated point in obedience, has no more reason to complain of the languor of his love; no more reason to bewail the impotence of his depraved nature? Greater attainments in religion than those of the holy apostle Paul, it is presumed, were never made by any man; and did he imagine himself possessed of full ability to keep the law of God perfectly, when in the bitterness of his spirit he exclaimed, "Oh! wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

For an answer to these interrogatories, let Presbyterians refer to the Standards of their Church, and they will find how explicitly such ability in any of our fallen race is denied. In reply to the eighty-second question, the Shorter Catechism asserts, "No mere man, since the fall, *is able* in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed." In reference to believers, the Confession of Faith (Chap. xvi. Sect. 3.) affirms, "Their *ability* to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ." The larger Catechism, in answer to the ninety-ninth question, states it as one use of the

* Deuteronomy, vi. 5.

moral law to *all men*, "To convince them of their *disability* to keep it." And in reply to the question relative to man's ability, it harmonizes with the Shorter Catechism, confirming the truth by the introduction of a few additional terms. The answer is thus forcibly stated: "No mere man is *able*, either of *himself*, or *by any grace* received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed."

Such is the language of that form of sound words published and acknowledged by the Presbyterian Church as their standard of doctrine. But, from the decisions of these standards, an appeal may be taken to the Holy Scriptures. Acknowledging the supreme authority of divine revelation, to which all confessions of faith must do homage, we are willing to meet the advocates of man's ability at that bar from which can lie no appeal.

What is the language of inspired writers on this subject? Do they express themselves in terms calculated to nourish a self-sufficient spirit in sinners, by ascribing to them an ability to yield spiritual obedience, whenever they may be pleased to put forth this hidden power? By no means. On the one hand, they assert and maintain the high claims of Jehovah, by requiring them to repent, to believe, and to obey; but on the other, they teach them explicitly their weak, and ruined, and helpless condition by nature, and their absolute dependence on divine grace for the requisite ability; lest, in the pride of their own imagined power, they should postpone attention to duty, or, in attempting it, should fail, by resting on themselves, instead of looking to the Almighty for his proffered aid.

To the Jews our Lord said, "No man *can* come to me, except the Father, which sent me, draw him;" and to his apostles, when disclosing to them the source of all their fruitfulness in good works, and of all their ability to serve God, "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch *cannot* bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine: no more *can* ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much

fruit: for without me ye *can do nothing*.”* This same truth, so humbling to the pride of human nature, is inculcated in the writings of the apostles. “For,” says Paul, “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one against the other; so that ye *cannot do the things ye would*.”† In another place, he says, “For when we were *without strength*,‡ Christ died for us:” and the same truth he inculcates in a subsequent chapter, where, by a figure of Scripture, he ascribes the impotence of human nature to the divine law; “For what the law could not do in that it was *weak* through the *flesh*, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, condemned sin in the flesh.”§ The constant recollection of this truth, so interwoven with his experience, kept this great man humble amidst the triumphs attending his labours: “Not that we are *sufficient of ourselves* to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God. I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live I live by the faith of Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me. To will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good, I find not.”§

So plain and repeated is the decision of the divine oracles against the ability of man to do the will of God. This decision will appear still plainer and more conclusive, if it can be shown from the representation given in the records of inspiration of the change produced by divine grace in a sinner, that a *new principle*, or *power* of action is communicated. How is it described? It is new life: “You hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins.”|| It is a new birth: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** It is a new creation: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.”†† Now, is it possible that so vast and radical a change

* John xv. 1. † Gal. v. 17. ‡ Rom. v. 6. § Rom. viii. 3. || Ephes. ii. 1.
 ** John iii. 3. †† Ephes. ii. 10.

can be produced in sinful man, by the mighty power of God, without being attended by the communication of a new principle of action? He is born again; he is created anew; he is endowed with new life; he is made a new creature in Christ Jesus; and yet no new faculty, no new power is given to him which he did not possess before! Impossible.

True, he retains essentially the same faculty of understanding which he had previously to his regeneration: but this faculty has been so changed and illuminated, that an inspired writer speaks of it as if the sinner had no understanding before: "And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us *an understanding*, that we may know him that is true."* "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."† True, he retains essentially the same faculty of will; but this faculty has been so changed and influenced by divine grace, that it has received a new bias, and a power to act in a holy manner: "It is God that worketh in us both to *will* and to do of his good pleasure."‡ True, he retains essentially the same system of affections; but this system has been so renewed, purified, and elevated, that the change is described as the exchange of one heart for another: "And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh."§ Can it then be doubted, whether this *spiritual life*, which quickens every faculty of the soul, pouring light into the understanding, infusing a holy bias into the will, giving sensibility to the heart, and turning the current of the affections from earth to heaven, is a new principle, a new power of action? Animal life, and rational life, are combined in the same being, but they are principles and powers of action distinct and different from each other; and so is spiritual life a principle, a power, distinct and different from both.

The testimony of experience on the question harmonizes both with the decision of Holy Scripture, and with the language of our standards of doctrine. The sinner is awakened;

* 1 John v. 20. † 2 Cor. iv. 6. ‡ Phil. ii. 13. § Ezek. xxxvi. 26.

he sets about the work of reformation in his own strength, vainly imagining he has sufficient for its accomplishment. Does the experiment justify his lofty notions of his own ability? If he really possess adequate power, why is he constrained to cry to God for help and strength? Why beseech the Lord to grant what he does not need? Pardon he certainly needs; and for pardon he may with great propriety ask; but if he possess ample power to repent, believe, and do the whole will of God, where is the consistency in praying for grace to *enable* him to perform his duty? Every petition of this kind surely contradicts the position controverted. Ah! experience humbles the sinner's lofty notions. He makes trial of his strength; he puts forth his hand to the mighty work; and he finds his impotence. The uniform result of every experiment furnishes a comment on those memorable words in which God, while he teaches the sinner to despair of himself, encourages him to hope in omnipotent grace: "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help."*

When put to the test the faculties of sinful man prove insufficient for the work required from him; and he learns the mortifying truth that he is indeed unable to perform his duty: not from the want of an understanding, but from the want of an enlightened understanding; not from the want of a will, but from the want of a subdued and holy will; not from the want of affections, but from the want of sanctified affections. And while his rational faculties are thus disabled by sin, he finds it as impossible to repent and believe, as it is for a paralytic to do the actions he was accustomed to do while his limbs were sound and vigorous.

Is the correctness of this exhibition of Christian experience called in question? Let it be compared with a statement given by the pen of inspiration. Paul, like other natural men, entertained, before his conversion, lofty notions of his natural ability. "I was," says he, "alive without the law once:" meaning that while he was ignorant of the spiritual nature of the law, and of the vast extent of its requirements, he doubted

* Hosea xiii. 9.

not his power to keep it, and thus to merit its promised reward. But how great a change was produced in his views by the light of the Holy Spirit! How was his pride abased, and his impotence disclosed, when the true nature and wide demands of the law were presented to his mind! "But when the comandment came, sin revived, and I died." Now the experiment was made; now his boasted ability was put to the test. What was the result? So far from being able to keep this holy law, he found, by woeful experience, that the application of its rigorous demands to his conscience, served only to irritate his lusts, to awaken his dormant sins, and to discover to him his deep-rooted and dreadful depravity. "Sin" he confesses, "taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence:" and thus, "the commandment, which was ordained unto life, he found to be unto death."*

It appears, then, whether the appeal be made to the standards of our Church, or to the testimony of Christian experience, or to the oracles of the living God, that sinful man is unable to repent, to believe, or to do his will: and it follows, that the language on which we animadvert, is a manifest departure from the form of sound words used both in the Bible, and in that book which we acknowledge as the Confession of our Faith, and as containing a correct exhibition of revealed truth.

To justify themselves, preachers who use such language, will recur to a favourite distinction, and say they mean, not a *moral*, but a *natural*, ability. And why do not they keep in view this distinction? Why use such unqualified language? Why assert that man has full ability, ample power, when they intend only natural ability, in opposition to moral ability, of which they affirm he is destitute?

Moral ability, then, by their own acknowledgment, is necessary to the actual performance of obedience to God's holy will, as well as natural ability; consequently the latter, separate from the former, is not sufficient; and it is, therefore, un-

* Rom. vii.

warrantable to affirm, that sinners possess ability, full ability to do whatever is required from them by the divine law. An unregenerate man has a natural power to eat; God commands him to eat to his glory: and can this man perform the action of eating in a holy manner, while destitute of renewing grace, because he has the bodily organs necessary for masticating his food? By no means: he can eat, but he cannot eat to the glory of God: he can do the natural action, but he cannot do it in the holy manner in which God commands it to be done.

A combination of two powers is necessary to raise a certain weight. Here is the human, and there the mechanical, power; I assert, there is full power to raise the weight. Remove the human and leave the mechanical power, or take away the mechanical and leave the human power; I assert there is not power to raise the weight.

But what is meant by this natural ability in sinners to do the will of God? Does it mean no more than that they are endowed with the faculties of understanding, will, and affections, and are therefore accountable creatures? This is the signification attributed to the phrase by Fuller, Smalley, and others. Our objection to the use of this phrase, when employed to denote the possession of these faculties, shall be stated in a subsequent part of this essay. At present our design is to expose the impropriety of maintaining that sinners have full ability to do all that is required of them by the law of God.

If the possession of these faculties constitute the ability of sinners, then they must be in such an unimpaired state as really to enable them to fulfil the requirements of the law, without the aid of any other power, or the mode of speaking adopted by some divines, cannot be justified; because an ability that is not sufficient to perform any work, certainly cannot be denominated, with any propriety of speech, full ability, ample power. But the advocates of this phraseology allow the understanding to be blind, the will rebellious, and the affections perverse; and moreover maintain, that till sinners be

born again, regenerated in a supernatural manner, created anew by Almighty power, they never will repent, never will believe, never will obey. Now, if these faculties must undergo a supernatural change before sinners can obtain that moral ability which is absolutely necessary to enable them to do their duty, what becomes of their full ability, their ample power? That the unregenerate possess the faculties belonging to human nature, which make them accountable creatures, no one denies: this is not the question at issue; it is one widely different,—Whether they possess full ability to do whatever is required of them while all these faculties are corrupted, disordered, and enfeebled by sin? This is the question. If they be endowed with such ability, then they know their duty in all its extent, and their understanding is not blinded; if they be endowed with such ability, then their hearts are free from enmity, and burning with supreme and intense love of God: because, without such knowledge of duty and such love to God, it is impossible to keep his holy law: and to affirm a man to be possessed of present ability to keep the law perfectly, and at the same time to affirm that he is ignorant of its requirements, and destitute of love to the supreme Lawgiver, is a contradiction; for the law requires him this moment to know his duty fully, and to act from perfect and unabating love to God. But for such knowledge and such love in unregenerate sinners they do not contend; on the contrary, they allow them to be at once destitute both of the one and the other: why, then, will they use language so grossly improper as that which we censure; and, in opposition to their own acknowledged principles, assert that men, blind in their understandings, and in their hearts opposed to God, possess full ability, ample power to fulfil all his good and holy will!

Compare this ability with the work it has to perform. The law requires them to know the Lord; but they know him not! The law commands them to love God with all their hearts; but enmity reigns in their hearts! The law requires them to bow their wills submissively to its supreme authority; but

their wills are rebellious! The law commands them to centre all their affections on Jehovah; but their affections are centred on the world! When ignorance shall become the source of knowledge, and enmity the parent of love; when obedience shall spring from rebellion, and order from disorder, as their natural fruits; then, and not till then, will it be true, or consistent, to affirm, that an unregenerate sinner has full ability to keep all the commandments of the Lord our God.

To maintain that fallen man has ability to do the whole will of God, is to maintain that he has an ability superior to that of Adam in his primeval state of innocence and holiness. When our first parent came fresh from the creating hand of God, light, and love, and order reigned in all his faculties; and, in the course of his obedience, he had to struggle with no inward darkness, or disorder, or corruption. Free from every defect and weakness, his powers were perfectly equal to the work required from him by the law of his God.

With such ability was the first man blest; and less than this could not have been pronounced sufficient. Have, we ask, his posterity such ability? Are their faculties in this perfect state? All are depraved by sin: darkness, enmity, and disorder reign in the soul. And yet with faculties, thus corrupted and enfeebled, it is asserted, that fallen man has ability to do the whole will of God; and in fact, to do more than was required from our great progenitor, while rejoicing in the full possession of all those noble and holy endowments with which he was enriched by the munificence of his Creator: for he is commanded to convert himself,—to make himself a new heart,—to rise from the dead,—and to become a new creature! How extravagant the assertion! All this is his duty, because his Maker requires it from him; but the work far transcends his ability, and can be accomplished only by the mighty power of God. To convert the soul from sin to holiness,—to take away the stony heart, and give a heart of flesh,—to raise the sinner from the dead,—and to create him a new creature in Christ Jesus, and adorn him with the lost image of his Creator,—is described by inspired writers as the appro-

priate work of Jehovah: and it seems surprising that sensible men, contemplating the nature of the work, and attributing the glory of it to our God, and allowing it never was, and never will be, accomplished by any son or daughter of Adam, still maintain the ability of man to be equal to it.

Jehovah proclaims to apostate man his entire duty, not to inflate him with lofty notions of his own power, but to convince him that he is fallen from his primitive rectitude; to abase his pride, by teaching him his impotence and vileness; to awaken his fears by a sense of his misery: and that feeling his depravity, his wretchedness, and his utter inability to fulfil the will of God, or to rescue himself from his deplorable circumstances, he may be constrained to look for deliverance to that merciful Being whom he has offended, and from whom alone can come all-sufficient aid.

To the preceding discussion it may be objected by some, that the term *natural* has been used in a sense different from what they choose to give it. We mean by it, they may say, what it signifies, when we speak of the *natural*, as distinguished from the *moral*, attributes of the Supreme Being. Let us try the question on this ground; and inquire whether this signification of the term will authorize the assertion that sinners have full ability to do the whole will of God.

It is admitted by the objectors, that fallen man has not *moral* ability to obey the divine law: and consequently they must allow it to be *impossible* for the unregenerate to yield the required obedience; or maintain the absurd position, that they can keep the law of love without love in the heart, serve the Lord with a rebellious will, and delight in him with affections under the reigning influence of sin; or that they can, in a *moment*, regenerate and create themselves anew, and render themselves perfect, as their Father in heaven is perfect.

The union of two powers, natural and moral, is necessary to qualify a man for yielding obedience to the divine law: it follows, therefore, that if one (the moral for instance) of the requisite powers be destroyed, man is no longer qualified to yield obedience. His ability is gone. Natural ability to do natural

actions may remain; but surely he has lost the ability which was the result of the union of the two powers.

To illustrate this idea, let us recur to the distinction made between the divine attributes of the Supreme. His *natural* attributes constitute his power to do *natural* actions, or actions corresponding to these perfections: his *moral* attributes constitute his ability to do *moral* actions, or to do all in a right and holy manner. Now, (if the reverence due to his glorious majesty will allow the supposition,) let us suppose the Deity deprived of his *moral*, while he retains his *natural*, attributes, what would be the result? Manifestly this: He would still possess the power of doing natural actions, but he would be destitute of power to do moral actions. He would be capable of astonishing the universe by displays of omnipotence, and of confounding his creatures by terrible exhibitions of grandeur; but he would be incapable of acting in that holy and just, good and merciful, benevolent and lovely manner, in which our God invariably acts, and by which he attaches to himself the heart of every intelligent creature that wears his image. To affirm that such a Being had ability to do *moral* actions, would be a gross violation of correct language.

The case of man is parallel. When originally created, he was endowed by his Creator with natural ability to do natural actions, and with moral ability to do moral or holy actions; but by his apostacy he was deprived of the latter, though not of the former: and to assert, that man, in his lapsed state, possesses ability to act in a *holy*, merely because he retains the power of acting in a *natural*, manner, is indeed absurd, and setting aside the use of moral power altogether. While his heart remained pure and uncorrupted, he had both the power of speech, and the power of speaking in a holy way, by using his tongue to the glory of its Maker; but when his heart became polluted with sin, he lost the *latter*, though he retained the *former*, power: he could still do the natural action, but he could not do it in a holy manner; he could use his tongue in speaking, but he could not use it, as duty requires, to the glory of God.

With this illustration the language of our Confession of Faith, perfectly accords. "Man by his fall hath wholly lost all *ability* of *will* to any *spiritual good* accompanying salvation; so as a *natural* man, being altogether averse from that which is good, and dead in sin, is *not able*, by his *own strength*, to convert himself or to prepare himself thereunto." Chap. ix. Sect. 3. And what is more important, the statement harmonizes with the language of Holy Scripture, as will appear from the texts cited in support of this article in our Confession: and as several of them have already been used in the course of this essay, we shall here quote only one: "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."*

In a recent publication, which maintains that sinners have *ample power* to love God, and full ability to do his will, the author explains his meaning thus: "But the ability which is ascribed to them ought to be distinctly explained. It is a *natural* ability in distinction from a *moral*. By moral I mean that which has relation to praise or blame:"† and by *natural* he must mean that which bears *no relation to praise or blame*. Here, then, he exhibits the nature of this full ability. It is an ability which bears no relation to praise or blame; and yet this is full ability to do a work which, in the highest sense, bears relation to praise! What a correspondence between the nature of the work and the nature of the power!

But where shall we find this ability? In what part of human nature is it seated? Is it the understanding, or the will, or the heart, or all combined? It can be neither of these faculties, nor can it consist in the united force of all; because all these faculties bear relation to praise and blame, and we are accountable for the exercise of them. We are not blameable in having an understanding; but we are blameable in having a blinded understanding. We are not blameable in having a will; but we are blameable in having a will opposed to the will of God. We are not blameable in having a heart; but we are blameable in having a hard and stony heart. In what then, does this

* Rom. viii. 7. † Griffin's Lectures.

ability consist? In our bodily organs? Has the sinner full ability to love and serve God, because he has hands and feet, eyes and ears? Why, even these organs bear some relation to praise or blame, and may be used either "as instruments of righteousness unto God," or "as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin." Indeed, we do not know in what this writer places his full ability; and from his definition or explanation, we should despair of discovering in what faculty, either of body or mind, it is seated.

The same writer concludes his argument thus: "There is no difficulty in the way, but what you are *to blame for*,—none therefore but of a *moral* nature,—therefore no *natural inability*,—of course you must have *natural power*." Here is a show of argument. Let us examine it, and see if the author's reasoning will abide the test furnished by this syllogism. If the sinner's inability be moral, that is, *blameable*, the inference is just that it cannot be natural, that is, *unblameable*. So far the reasoning is sound. But is the conclusion logically drawn? If it is, then the term *natural*, in the conclusion, has precisely the same signification which it has in the premises: in the premises it means *unblameable*, and, consequently, in the conclusion it must mean *unblameable*. Let us then give this explanation to the term in the conclusion, and it will read thus: "Of course you must have natural, that is, *unblameable* power!"

Once more we ask, Is it logical to infer from the want of one power the possession of another; or does it follow because the sinner's inability is *blameable*, he must have *unblameable power*? Can you prove from the fact that a man has no disposition to relieve the wants of the poor, that he must have plenty of money? May he not be alike destitute of both? May he not have a hard, covetous, unfeeling heart, while he is poor in his outward estate?

In every view that has been taken of this subject, the language on which we animadvert appears incorrect; and we are constrained to conclude, that our brethren who use it, either do not express their own meaning, or inculcate an error.

But we may be asked, Do you deny the inability of sinners to be *moral*? We reply, If by that term be meant what is inexcusable, sinful, we certainly do not; and, it is presumed, nothing has been advanced in this discussion to countenance any idea of the kind. In this point we unite with those whose doctrine we condemn; and warmly inculcate the important truth, that the sinner has no excuse for transgressing a holy law, and being opposed in heart to his glorious Creator and rightful Sovereign. The law still presses on him its righteous demands in all their extent, notwithstanding his inability, and refuses to debate an iota in favour of the corruptions of his nature.

Having thus exposed the unqualified language used by some preachers, we proceed to state our objections to the more guarded, but exceptionable, language adopted by others.

We have no design to contest the propriety of making a distinction between natural and moral ability. There is sufficient foundation for it. Man, even in his fallen state, certainly possesses natural ability to do many actions; and the assertion of his inability to do *holy*, by no means requires the denial of power to perform *natural*, actions. He has power to eat and drink, to think and speak; to read and hear the word of God, to meditate and pray: in a word, he has the faculties of a living and rational creature. While, therefore, we admit it to be correct to say, he possesses natural ability to perform actions which he really can do, we apprehend it to be incorrect to say he has natural ability to obey the whole will of God: that is, to perform actions which he really cannot do.

The phrase is calculated to MISLEAD. It is very indefinite in its meaning, and is actually used by different writers to signify very different ideas. Hence it is often hard to know what it is intended to denote by those who use it. Common hearers may very naturally suppose that it means full ability, and that the sinner needs no other power to enable him to keep all the commandments, but only an excitement to put forth the ability which he already possesses.

As the phrase is calculated to mislead, so it is UNWARRANTABLE. An infant child has feet, and the organs of speech; but till he has acquired the art of walking and speaking, he certainly has not ability either to walk or to speak. A man has a mind capable of becoming acquainted with philosophical subjects; but till he has studied philosophy, he certainly has not ability to discourse on such subjects. It would be deemed absurd to assert that a child had natural ability to speak and walk, when he had not learned the art of speaking and walking; or to assert that a man, entirely ignorant of philosophical subjects, possessed natural ability to discourse in a philosophical manner. And it is not more absurd to assert, that sinful man has natural ability to do holy actions, when he certainly cannot do these actions, till divine grace have given him the requisite ability? For a child to learn to walk and to speak, requires only time and practice; and for a man of understanding to learn to discourse on philosophical subjects, demands only diligent study: but for fallen man to obtain ability to love and serve his Maker, requires an entire change of his nature; a change produced, not by the exertion of any power in himself, but by the mighty power of God. To affirm that the child has feet, and may learn to walk, and that man has an understanding, and may become a philosopher, would be true; and to affirm that fallen man possesses rational faculties, and may be made the subject of renewing grace, and be endowed with power from on high to obey his Creator's will, would likewise be true: but to affirm concerning either that he has natural ability to do what in fact he has not ability to do, is, in our apprehension, an *unwarrantable* use of language.

It is worthy of observation how the use of this phrase betrays its advocates into *contradictory statements*. In a recent publication we find the following assertions: "The Gospel declares that we are, by *nature*, children of disobedience, having NO POWER to please God;"—the sinner "is without spiritual strength;"—he "never *will* come, and never *can* come to Christ, without the special grace of God;"—he is "utterly polluted and *helpless*:" and yet the author lays it down as a

"great and important principle in the Divine government that more is never required than there is natural *power* to perform."*

The author of another late publication, in order to prove that regeneration is a *supernatural* work of divine grace, takes a survey of all the faculties of human nature, and, from their corrupt and disordered state, evinces that there can be found in them no adequate cause from which this great and entire change can proceed: and after having established this important truth by arguments thus derived from the impaired and depraved state of his natural faculties, he affirms again and again, that the unregenerate man has *full power, ample ability*, to do all required from him by the will of God!† And consequently, as he is commanded to make himself a new heart, he is able to *regenerate himself*.

Nor has Fuller escaped the rock against which others have struck their adventurous barks. This will appear from comparing a few passages in his "*Gospel worthy of all acceptance*." "The law of God itself," (he asserts in p. 117) "requires no creature to love him, or obey him, beyond his *strength*, or with more than all the powers which he possesses;"‡ but in page 122, he states an objection to his doctrine thus: "It is sometimes suggested, that to ascribe natural ability to sinners to perform things spiritually good, is to nourish their self-sufficiency; and to represent their inability as only moral, is to suppose that it is *not insuperable*, but may be overcome by efforts of their own." Are not these passages contradictory? The first asserts that sinners have strength sufficient to love and obey God; but the second asserts that their *inability* to do things spiritually good, or to love and obey God, is *insuperable*, and not to be overcome by efforts of their own. STRENGTH sufficient, and *insuperable* INABILITY!!! If a man labour under an insuperable inability to do any thing, he certainly has not strength sufficient to do that thing, although he may have strength to do many other things. Were the natural ability of sinners sufficient to overcome their moral inability, then it

*Richard's sermon on the sinner's inability. †Griffin's lectures. ‡Collin's ed. N. Y.

might be asserted that they had sufficient strength to do things spiritually good, or to love and obey God: but that they have not such strength is asserted by Fuller still more strongly, in page 152, where, referring to our Lord's address to the young ruler, who inquired what he must do to inherit eternal life, he observes, "that to which he was directed was the producing of a righteousness adequate to the demands of the law, which was *NATURALLY impossible*." It was *naturally impossible* for this young man to fulfil the demands of the law, and yet he was required to do nothing beyond his strength! It was *naturally impossible* for him to fulfil the demands of the law, and yet he had *natural ability* to obey the law, or fulfil all its demands!!

We have another, and an important objection to this phrase, and that is, It does not answer the purpose for which it has been coined.

It is inculcated by all who embrace the doctrines of grace, as an essential truth, that man, in his fallen state, is *unable* to keep the commandments of God. To this humiliating truth it is objected, that it goes to set aside the obligation to obedience; and it is confidently asked, as if the objection could not be answered, How can it be just in the Creator to demand from his creatures an obedience which they are unable to yield, and then to punish them for inevitable disobedience? We meet the difficulty presented in this objection by recurring to the fall of Adam, our federal head and representative. Had man, we admit, been originally created in his present state, the law by which he is governed, would indeed have been disproportionate to his powers; but as he was *at first* made upright, free from every sinful bias, and endowed with ample powers to yield the required obedience; and as by his own wilful transgression he corrupted his nature, and thus, by impairing his own powers, rendered himself unable to keep the commandments of God; we contend it is just in our Supreme Legislator to insist on the obedience originally demanded from him; because an inability contracted by wilful apostacy, can neither diminish the right of the Creator to command, nor lessen the obligation of the creature to obey.

With this reply the advocates of natural ability are not satisfied. They imagine a more complete and satisfactory answer is given by the distinction they make between natural and moral inability. So think Fuller and Smalley.

Now, if it can be shown that this distinction contributes not a particle of weight to the answer already given, nor sheds a single new ray of light, it will appear to be of no value in reference to the objection. What, we ask, is meant by natural ability? They answer, the rational faculties of man, his understanding, will, and affections. That man possesses these faculties is not denied; and it is admitted also, that if he were deprived of them he would cease to be a moral agent—an accountable creature. No proof, then, is required to show that he is endowed with these attributes; and if proof were demanded, it would not be found in the bare assertion of his natural ability. What is the question, then, at issue? Not whether man possesses natural faculties, but how a creature, possessing these faculties in a state so corrupted and disordered by sin as to be rendered unable to obey the divine law, can be justly required to yield an obedience beyond his ability? Now, to affirm that man has natural ability to yield obedience, is no answer to the question; for it amounts to nothing more than to assert what is admitted in the question,—that he has understanding, will, and affections. To give weight to this phrase, and make it worth contending for, it ought to signify more than Fuller and Smalley ascribe to it; it should convey what, it is to be apprehended, it does convey to many minds, that fallen man has all the ability he needs, and labours under no inability whatever to yield obedience. This is felt by some who rely on this distinction: and hence, it seems, they lay aside the use of the qualifying term *natural*, and assert the *full ability*, the *ample power* of man: yet shrinking back from the true import of their phraseology, they speak of the moral *inability* of man; because facts and Scripture compel them to admit the truth. Such a reply, however, to the objection, would not remove the difficulty; it would be an admission that it was insurmountable, and an acknowledgement that inability

of any kind would release man from the duty of obedience to the law of God.

It appears, then, that the reply to the objection, by the advocates of natural ability, when carefully examined, amounts to nothing; and as the phrase does not answer the purpose for which it was invented, it should, for this, and other reasons, be discarded. The only reply to the objection is what we stated; it is sufficient and satisfactory: and if the sinner, feeling his inability, will still dispute the equity of the law in exacting an obedience beyond his strength, he must settle the matter with his Maker, who will doubtless bring forth his judgment unto victory.

We urge but one more objection to this phrase. There is just as much reason for ascribing to man *moral* ability to perform the required obedience, as there is to ascribe to him natural ability. Were we to denominate the understanding, will, and affections, moral faculties, some might feel disposed to dispute the matter with us; but as they must acknowledge that man has a moral faculty or faculties, it is unnecessary for us to defend our opinion; enough is granted to make out the truth of our assertion. Man possesses both natural and moral faculties; if, therefore, it be correct to affirm that he has *natural* ability, because he possesses the *former*, it must be correct to affirm that he has *moral* ability, because he possesses the *latter* faculties: the ground of the one assertion is just as good as that of the other.

The sum of the preceding discussion may be stated in the following propositions:

1. That fallen man is unable to obey the will of God.
2. That the faculties of understanding, will, and affections, belonging to human nature, do not supply him with ability to yield the obedience required; because these faculties are so corrupted and disordered by sin, that, without the renovating grace of the Holy Spirit, he can neither love, nor serve, nor obey the Lord, as duty commands.
3. That his inability is *inexcusable*, or, if you please, *moral*, because it arises from the depravity of his nature; and as this

inability is inseparable from a depraved nature, and is born with the sinner, it may in truth be termed *natural* as well as moral.

4. That although man has what may be called *natural*, in distinction from *moral* ability, yet the possession of natural ability, while it enables him to do many corresponding actions, does not enable him to perform holy actions.

From this view of the condition of man by nature, the course to be pursued by a minister of the Gospel is plain. He is to declare the truth, and the whole truth. While he insists on the requirements of the law, maintaining that it demands perfect and sinless obedience; let him not be afraid, openly and distinctly to announce the mortifying fact, that 'no mere man, since the fall, is able, in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.' By inculcating the former truth, his hearers will be convinced that their impotence, from whatever source it may arise, is criminal, and furnishes them with no excuse; because it does not release them from the obligations of duty, nor procure in their favour any abatement in the demands of God's holy law: and by inculcating the latter truth, they will be guarded against a mistaken reliance on their own strength, and admonished both of the necessity of depending on Him whose strength is made perfect in weakness, and of the duty of imploring, by earnest and importunate prayers, that grace which is free and all-sufficient for perishing and helpless sinners.

On this plan acted the apostles; and it should be adopted by every Christian minister. In the writings of these inspired teachers we find the following propositions:

That man is an accountable creature.

That, by nature, he is unable to please God, or keep his commandments. And,

That this inability, arising from the corruption of his nature, is inexcusable.

But they never attempt to reconcile the *seeming* inconsistency between the two last propositions, by teaching, or inti-

inating that man, in his present fallen state, has ability to do all that is required of him by the law. Both truths they inculcate, and leave the difficulty to be settled between God and the sinner's conscience.

Not satisfied with this scriptural statement, some divines, in their endeavours to remove a *seeming* inconsistency, have produced a real *contradiction*; maintaining that man has *ability* for obedience, while they assert his *inability*.

FINIS.



